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Language, Mythology, and Enlightenment: Historical Notes on Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment

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Turning Fifty

FIFTY is an awkward age, for books no less than people. While it is not quite time to think of it as inhabiting a different age, there are difficulties in viewing a work of social criticism written in 1947 as a commentary on our world. To reread the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972[1947]) is to be tossed between moments of recognition (a world in which people willingly wear clothing that sports the logo of its manufacturer makes the chapter on the "culture industry" look terribly prescient) and of bewilderment (it is hard, at a time when little serious music is found on the radio, to appreciate why Toscanini's broadcasts could move Adorno to such disgust). At fifty, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has become one of those books that can neither be regarded simply as a piece of history nor taken unproblematically as addressing our concerns.

Perhaps because so much in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* nevertheless remains current, it is worth resisting the temptation to

enlist it in current debates in the humanities and social sciences. It might be worthwhile to subject it to the same sort of historical distancing that historians of political thought have urged us to bring to other texts. If there is something to be gained by recognizing that, whatever he was doing, John Locke was not fighting our battles, it might not be too soon to suggest—if only for a moment—that we should not expect Horkheimer and Adorno to do our work for us. Separating the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from our concerns might allow us to get a better handle on what these two German-Jewish exiles were attempting, half a century ago, when they settled into the hills just outside Hollywood to begin work on this most peculiar of books.

Such an approach has more to recommend it than the simple fact that the book has turned fifty. Over the last decade, the staff of the Horkheimer Archive has, through the publication of Horkheimer's *Nachlass* and correspondence, made available to those scholars willing to make the effort the resources needed to begin reconstructing the process by which the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written. In what follows I will draw on three sets of materials: (1) the manuscript drafts and transcripts of discussions from the period of the composition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published as Volume 12 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*; (2) Horkheimer's letters from the same period, published in Volumes 16 and 17; and (3) the critical edition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* itself, published as Volume 5, which for the first time provides a thorough documentation of the differences between the 1944 version of the book, circulated in mimeograph among the associates of the Institute for Social Research, and the 1947 version published by Querido in Amsterdam.[1] In the argument that follows, I will begin by considering some of the differences between the 1944 and the 1947 versions and then explore some of the concerns with truth and language that lie at the origin of the project. I will conclude with a discussion of the development of Horkheimer and Adorno's views on the relation of mythology and enlightenment, and suggest how their rethinking of this rela-

tionship laid the groundwork for what would become the overarching argument of the book.

"Philosophical Fragments" or a "Dialectic of Enlightenment"?

What eventually would become the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* first entered the world in December 1944 as a mimeographed typescript of over three hundred pages distributed to friends and associates of the Institute for Social Research. Printed on the brown pasteboard cover was the original title: *Philosophische Fragmente.* Theodor Adorno provided an explanation of sorts for the work's peculiar mode of dissemination in one of the aphorisms he presented to his coauthor Max Horkheimer the next February on the occasion of Horkheimer's fiftieth birthday:

> In a world where books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one. If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive means of dissemination (Adorno, 1974, p. 51).

Slipping virtually unnoticed into a world where the culture industry churned out products that, as Adorno would later observe, looked more like advertisements for books than actual books (Adorno, 1992, p. 20), the strange volume that Horkheimer and Adorno passed on to their colleagues was one of those books that could no longer be one. Its title confessed what its unusual form of dissemination implied: here was a collection of fragments, incomplete and perhaps even contradictory, with an identity rather different from more conventional products of the publishing industry.

Even their colleagues were not quite sure what to make of it. After struggling with the manuscript for a few months, a bewildered Herbert Marcuse wrote to Horkheimer,

> I have gone through the *Fragmente* twice, and I have reread many sections more than twice. However my reading was not continuous and concentrated enough. . . . The result: there are too many passages which I don't understand, and too many ideas which I cannot follow up beyond the condensed and abbreviated form in which you give them (17, p. 636).

When Horkheimer asked his friend Leo Loewenthal for the names of a few well-known writers who might recommend the manuscript to publishers, Loewenthal deadpanned, "Huxley, as far as I know, does not read German, and Joyce is dead" (17, p. 571). Loewenthal's quip hit the mark: the manuscript appeared as unrelenting in its pessimism as *Brave New World* and nearly as baffling as *Finnegans Wake.*

The diversity of its contents alone might have been enough to perplex its initial audience.[2] The first of its three chapters, which in the original version carried the title "Dialectic of Enlightenment," examined the relationship between enlightenment, mythology, and the scientific domination of nature. It was followed by two excursuses, one dealing with the *Odyssey,* the other with the unlikely coupling of Kant and the Marquis de Sade. The sprawling second chapter, entitled "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," examined the ways in which economic rationalization and mass production techniques had been brought to bear on both high and low culture, but had rather little to say about the enlightenment. The third chapter, "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment," was cast in the form of six theses that began by describing different varieties of anti-Semitism—for example, "nationalist" versus "bourgeois"—but then plunged into a lengthy discussion of the psychoanalytic concept of "projection," its significance for theories of epistemology, and its role in the creation of the ego. At the end of the work stood a series of "Notes and Drafts," which, according to the Preface, was for the most part directed toward a "dialectical anthro-

pology." The Preface itself closed with the hope that "in the not too distant future," this fragmentary and unfinished work might be completed (5, p. 23).

It wasn't. Over the following few years, Horkheimer and Adorno turned their attention to what was intended as the manuscript's sequel: a "positive theory of dialectics" that would explain how the "rescue of the enlightenment" might be accomplished.[3] Horkheimer drew on some of the arguments of the *Philosophische Fragmente* for a series of lectures at Columbia University that were published in English in 1947 as *Eclipse of Reason,* a work he dismissed as merely an "exoteric" presentation of the more serious work.[4] Adorno was left with the chore of readying the *Philosophische Fragmente* for publication, a task that largely involved toning down its Marxian language and dropping references to the incompleteness of the work.[5] One last thesis on anti-Semitism was added prior to the work's publication by the Amsterdam publishing house Querido in 1947. Rather late in the process, the 1944 title became the book's subtitle and the book was published under the title that had originally been carried by the first chapter: *Dialektik der Aufklärung.*[6] What we know as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was thus the product of a heroic job of copy-editing on Adorno's part that transformed a manuscript that openly proclaimed its incompleteness into something resembling a normal book and, at the same time, ditched a vocabulary that was unabashedly Marxian for one that was a good deal more Aesopian. Both points are worth exploring.

Martin Jay once characterized the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as the "last leg" in the Frankfurt School's "long march away from orthodox Marxism" (Jay, 1973, p. 256). But a comparison of the changes made between the 1944 *Philosophische Fragmente* and 1947 *Dialektik der Aufklärung* makes this "last leg" look more like a quick step. The overwhelming majority of the revisions Adorno made in the work involved a purging of Marxian terminology. Thus, to take a few examples from the first chapter, "exploitation" becomes "enslavement" (5, p. 26), "capitalism" becomes "the eco-

nomic system" (p. 26), "disposition over alien labor" becomes "utilization of the work of another" (p. 26), "monopoly technique" becomes "industrial technique" (p. 33), "object of exploitation" becomes "subject" (p. 36), "class domination" becomes "consolidated domination by the privileged" (p. 44), "exchange value" becomes simply "value" (p. 51), "apparatus in the perpetuation of monopoly" becomes "means of aiding the economic apparatus" (p. 53), "class society" becomes "society" (p. 60), "exploitation" becomes "injustice" (p. 60), and "capital" becomes "economy" (p. 62). These changes sometimes alter the meanings of sentences in important ways. To say, for instance, that "the concrete working conditions in society force conformity" (as the 1947 text has it) is to state something quite different than what is said in the 1944 version of the book: "the concrete working conditions in class society force conformity" (p. 60). The 1947 text is making a claim that applies to all societies at all times. The 1944 text is making a rather specific claim about class domination.

It is doubtful that these modifications reflect a sudden change of heart concerning the applicability of Marxian categories to the study of society. The 1944 text had, after all, already broken with many of the central assumptions of orthodox Marxism. Horkheimer and Adorno assumed that the proletariat had been completely assimilated into the workings of capital and they saw little prospect of resistance. But they continued to deploy the categories of Marxian political economy in their account of the freezing of class struggles under monopoly capital. One of Horkheimer's notes from 1942—entitled "History of the American Working Class" and not incorporated into either version of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—drove the point home with uncharacteristic bluntness:

> The historical course of the proletariat leads to a crossroads: it can become either a class or a racket. Racket means privileges within national frontiers, class means

> world revolution. The leaders have made the decision for the proletariat (12, p. 260).

The toning down of the Marxian language in the 1947 version would appear to represent nothing more than the desire to avoid speaking this bluntly in print at a time when neither Horkheimer nor Adorno had much confidence about what the future held for them.

Horkheimer's letters from the 1940s suggest that he was extremely sensitive to statements by other members of the exile community that described the Institute for Social Research as "Marxist."[7] For example, a 1943 letter to his friend Friedrich Pollock discussed at length how the institute should be defended against charges that it was politically "radical" (17, pp. 451–57). The lengths to which Horkheimer was willing to go in order to avoid even the appearance of radicalism border on the comic: before sending a colleague a copy of the mimeographed volume that the Institute for Social Research published in memory of Walter Benjamin, Horkheimer instructed Leo Loewenthal to "simply take a complete copy and cut the last article out. You may explain that the last pages were so misprinted that we had to destroy them—or find some other explanation" (17, p. 345). The article Loewenthal was instructed to remove was Horkheimer's essay "The Authoritarian State," which, with its defense of worker's councils, was perhaps the most politically radical essay he had written.

If the toning down of the Marxian vocabulary of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has prompted today's readers to neglect the extent to which the book presupposed the validity of an account of economic development in which the transition from "liberal" to "monopoly" capitalism continued to play a central role, Adorno's other modifications of the 1944 text have prompted an even more basic misunderstanding. No reader of the 1944 text could see the manuscript as a finished product. The 1944 version of the chapter on the "culture industry" ends with the words "to be contin-

ued" and the Preface held out the assurance that subsequent work would address "the positive aspects of mass culture" (5, pp. 196, 22). The 1947 version deletes both passages, leaving the reader to assume that there is nothing more to be said about the matter. Even the decision to change the title altered the way readers approach the book. When the book carried the title *Philosophische Fragmente,* the first chapter—which explored how enlightenment turns into myth, and how myth is already enlightenment—bore the title "Dialectic of Enlightenment." Posed in this way, there is little incentive to assume that the chapters on the culture industry or on anti-Semitism are to be read as further manifestations of the dialectic of mythology and enlightenment. To call the entire book the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to hold out a claim to comprehensiveness that is at odds with the previous title, which lived on as a subtitle.

This is neither to say that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* lacks coherence, nor is it to suggest that arguments examining how the fragmentary character of the book reflects the authors' own philosophical commitments have no merit. But it is to suggest that those readers who are not convinced that the book holds together or who are not persuaded by the virtues of "a philosophy in fragments" may not merely have themselves to blame. To at least some degree the book is fragmentary by default rather than design. In 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno still retained hopes for a rather different sort of book than the one they wound up publishing in 1947. For this reason alone, it might be worth examining some of the intentions that gave rise to the book in the first place.

Words and Weapons

One place to start is with a letter Horkheimer wrote in the summer of 1940 to Leo Loewenthal from Estes Park, Colorado, where—after a lecture at the University of Kansas—he spent a few days before driving on to Seattle. On the journey to Colorado, he

had heard one of Hitler's speeches on the radio. Its impact, as recounted in the letter, must have been shattering.

> On the journey here I have heard Hitler's speech. His word reaches over the plains and seas of the world, it penetrates into the most distant mountain valley. But I have never felt so strongly that it is not a word, but rather a force of nature. The word is concerned with truth, but this is a means of war, it belongs to the glistening armaments of the inhabitants of Mars (16, p. 731).

The experience of hearing Hitler's words on the radio, spreading over the plains of North America and tracking Horkheimer down as he drove toward the Rocky Mountains, appears to have crystallized, in a particularly forceful way, the unique relationship between language and mass communication that lay at the heart of fascism. As he and Adorno later observed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* wireless broadcasting stands in the same relationship to fascism as the printing press did to the Reformation. While earlier technological improvements in communication, such as the telephone, still allowed those who used them to function as subjects, radio had an inherent tendency to reduce its audience to a passive and anonymous mass. It was even less tolerant of "liberal deviations" than the Hollywood studio system (5, pp. 146, 187 [121–22, 159]).

> . . . radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; his voice rises from street loud-speakers to resemble the howling of sirens announcing panic—from which modern propaganda can scarcely be distinguished anyway. . . . The inherent tendency of radio is to make the human word, the false commandment, absolute (5, p. 187 [159]).

By making his words omnipresent, radio allowed Hitler to play God, and—with every listener cast in the role of Moses—dictate a new set of commandments.

Horkheimer had long been concerned with the role of language in modern politics, although explicit discussions of the theme are rare in his published works. In a 1936 lecture, "The Function of Speech in Modernity," Horkheimer elaborated on a theme he had noted, in passing, in his essay from the same year "Egoism and Freedom Movements" (Horkheimer, 1993, pp. 72–79). In the lecture, Horkheimer argued that ancient philosophers saw language as performing two distinguishable functions: it could serve as a means for the revelation of the truth and as a way of motivating listeners to undertake specific actions (12, pp. 24–25). With modernity, he argues, there emerges a new function for speech: it can serve as a means of "introversion," a process in which listeners transform their own inner lives and character. This new function differs from earlier uses of speech in that it has nothing to do with questions of truth and falsehood. It is instead directed "towards the psyche, towards the unconscious, towards drives" (12, pp. 27–28). In Horkheimer's view, this new function of speech achieves two basic social tasks: a "moralizing function," concerned with shaping the character of the bourgeoisie, which is manifested in a sense of self-responsibility and a hard and ascetic character; and an integration into society of the mass of individuals who are not property holders, which involves a deferring of satisfaction and an adjustment to the demands of industrial technology (12, pp. 29–30).

Horkheimer saw Hitler's addresses to mass audiences as exercises in "introversion" that moved individuals to carry out the negation of their own personality in the name of a "higher goal." For this reason, discussions of the particular propositional elements in Hitler's speeches miss the point. His speeches do not make truth claims. They instead employ stereotypical and ritualistic elements in order to bring about a process of introversion that culminates in a "love of the Führer" (12, p. 30). Thus, what matters is not what Hitler says but the simple fact that he has brought a mass of people to one place, at a particular time, in order to hear him speak. This fact alone suggests an important

transformation in the notion of ideology. In Marx's account, ideologies represent false universalizations of the particular interests of particular classes. Because they remained within the bounds of propositional speech, they could be subjected to a critique that pointed out their distortions. Fascist rhetoric, in contrast, does not advance propositional claims of any sort. It is more like a magical spell than a rational argument and those who are under its control need to be "educated and enlightened" rather than "persuaded" (12, p. 38).

Horkheimer returned to the question of what sort of response was demanded by fascist rhetoric in his 1940 letter to Loewenthal, and his response is a good deal more complex than the conclusion of his 1936 lecture. The passage quoted above, which concludes with the contrast between the "word" (which is concerned with "truth") and Hitler's speech (which strikes Horkheimer as a "weapon") continues as follows:

> However, the particular task that is posed to us is the determination of what truth is. Apparently the idealists already had something correct in sight with the self-knowledge of thinking, but they were too arrogant: one cannot put thought in the position of God. The bourgeois tendency towards fascism is hidden in this philosophical undertaking. One must earnestly inquire if, among the rummage that the church has sold off, something that is very valuable has, not unexpectedly, become dirt cheap: for example, the differentiation between thought and truth, with the latter God himself was identified. . . . Now what, now that God has been sold off! We must write our logic anew (16, p. 732).

This rather enigmatic passage contains a number of clues as to how Horkheimer saw the task before him as he prepared to begin work on what would become the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* The curious image of searching among the rummage that the church has discarded suggests that he had begun to move toward the

fusion of categories from historical materialism and theology that distinguished the work of Theodor Adorno and especially Walter Benjamin even before he had read the latter's posthumous "Theses on the Philosophy of History."[8] The mention of the need to revise "our logic" is a reference to the Horkheimer's initial designation for the book that would become the *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* in his letters from the late 1930s, he spoke of plans to write a "Dialectical Logic" or simply a "Dialectics" (16, p. 561). Horkheimer's initial descriptions of this book, which at various points he planned to write with Herbert Marcuse, with Karl Korsch, or with Franz Neumann, suggest a rather different undertaking than the work he wrote with Theodor Adorno. As he conceived it in 1938, the book would examine categories such as "causality, tendency, progress, law, necessity, freedom, class, culture, value, ideology, dialectic, etc.," as they are advanced in the "scientific and political discussion of social problems." His intent was to produce a work in which "a determination of philosophical concepts is, at the same time, a presentation of human society in its historically given constitution" (12, p. 156).

The passage in Horkheimer's letter to Loewenthal that is perhaps most important for the development of the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* however, is the discussion of the inherent linkage between "the word" and "truth" and the centrality of the discussion of truth for the project of critical social theory. The theme returns in a particularly dense passage near the end of the chapter in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the "culture industry." Reflecting on the impact of advertising on language, Horkheimer and Adorno observed

> The more completely language is lost in communication *[Mitteilung],* the more words are debased as substantial vehicles of meaning and become signs devoid of quality; the more purely and transparently words communicate what is intended, the more impenetrable they become. The demythologization of language, as an element of the total process of Enlightenment, falls back into magic. Word and

> content *[Gehalt]* were distinct, yet inseparable from one another. Concepts like melancholy, history, even life, were recognized in the word, which separated them out and preserved them. . . . The absolute separation which renders the order of words superfluous and the relationship of word and object arbitrary, puts an end to the superstitious merging of word and thing. Anything in a fixed, literal sequence that goes beyond the correlation to the event is banned as unclear and as linguistic metaphysics *[Wortmetaphysik]*. But the result is that the word, which can now be only a sign without meaning, becomes so fixed to the thing that it petrifies into a formula (5, p. 192 [164]).

The familiar theme of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—an escape from myth that collapses back into myth and magic—is here applied to language itself. Once words are no longer seen as evoking particular experiences, and instead become neutral signs, devoid of any connection with a domain of objects, they become rote formulae, invoked like magical incantations, before a reality that has become impenetrable. Words no longer serve to "bring objects to experience" but instead become slogans and catchwords that function like "conditioned reflexes" (5, pp. 193–94 [165–66]).

In the years immediately prior to the writing of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer had reflected again and again on what he saw as the loss of the expressive powers of language itself. The attempt by the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle to carry out a critique of language that sought to ground linguistic expression in physicalistic protocol sentences had long been an object of Horkheimer's criticism.[9] By the early 1940s, he had begun to turn this critique on himself. After writing to Harold Laski that "the matter of the authoritarian state is actually the most important we have to ponder," Horkheimer went on to note,

> But one has only to set down that it is "important" to ponder this and one sees how grotesque such a statement has

> now become. Language, and in a certain sense even thinking, are powerless and inadequate in face of what appears to be in store for mankind (17, p. 18).

Adorno shared Horkheimer's concern. A letter to Horkheimer from the fall of 1941 quoted from a note Adorno had written in 1939 that argued

> The prohibitive difficulty of theory is today manifested in language. It permits nothing more to be said as it is experienced. Either it is reified, commodity-speech, banal and halfway to falsifying thought. Or it is in flight from the banal, ceremonial without ceremony, empowered without power, confirmed by its own fist (17, p. 165).

Given these concerns, it is little wonder that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* began by observing that, in a world where "thought inevitably becomes a commodity and language the means of promoting that commodity," an account of the self-destruction of enlightenment could no longer conform to "current linguistic and conceptual conventions" (5, pp. 16–17 [xi–xii]).

The question of what sort of claims such an analysis was offering seems to have troubled Horkheimer considerably. While Horkheimer and Adorno's attempt to write a sequel to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that would elaborate a "positive" program by which the Enlightenment might be "rescued" remained unfinished and while none of the material that was said to have been completed has yet been found, there is one crucial point on which all of Horkheimer's descriptions of the work agree: it was to begin with a discussion of the nature of truth.[10] The renewed focus on the problem of truth—it should be remembered that Horkheimer had devoted a long essay in the *Zeitschrift fur Sozialforschung* to the topic (Horkheimer, 1993, pp. 117–216)—brought Horkheimer back to the concerns that had served as his point of departure for what eventually became the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* A 1939 letter to Robert Maynard Hutchins, presi-

dent of the University of Chicago, lays out the connections quite clearly:

> If one had to give a quick rough characterization of the complicated process of the breakdown of culture in recent decades—its ultimate causes in every field will be found to go back to the Renaissance—one might say that passionate and unconditional interest in truth has been replaced by an interest in "success." To be sure, some intellectuals do not openly maintain that there is no distinction to be made between a good and a bad social order, that one is not obliged to act justly, that God is a meaningless concept. Something much worse has happened. These concepts and their appropriate institutions still receive acknowledgment, but without concern for their concrete contents, without an orientation of science and life in their direction (16, pp. 536–37).

Here, in brief, is the central theme of *Dialectic of Enlightenment:* instrumental reason reduces truth to "success" and, in the process, robs reason of all substantive content. Horkheimer would summarize the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* precisely in these terms in his "exoteric" presentation of the work in the lectures that subsequently became *Eclipse of Reason.* But, if "subjective" or "instrumental" reason played the role (in Ludwig Marcuse's words) of the "devil" in this account (17, pp. 832–33), it was less than clear what could serve as an alternative.

In *Eclipse of Reason,* Horkheimer insisted that the neo-Thomist attempt to breath new life into the idea of an "objective" reason, inherent in nature, was fruitless (Horkheimer, 1947, pp. 65–70). An unpublished letter intended for the *Philosophical Review* was even more emphatic on this point:

> In spite of my critique of "subjective reason" and its relapse into a second mythology . . . I have never advocated a return to an even more mythological "objective reason"

> borrowed from history. Decisive elements of my own philosophy were derived from idealistic as well as materialistic schools of thought and I have attacked enlightenment in the spirit of enlightenment, not of obscurantism. . . . Philosophically or, rather, pragmatically ordained religion, stripped of whatever substance it may once have derived from genuine tradition, has by now tilted over into untruth, it can be swallowed only with a bad conscience (18, p. 23).

Horkheimer's reading of Adorno's 1941 manuscript "Zur Philosophie der neuen Musik" had convinced him that Hegel's notion of "determinate negation" could provide a fruitful methodological orientation for the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (17, p. 149). But by 1946 he seemed acutely sensitive to the limits of Hegel's approach. The discussions with Adorno on the planned sequel to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* come to a climax when Horkheimer offered the following response to Adorno's suggestion that as "theoreticians of reason" they should interrogate "transcendental-logical categories" according to "their own meaning":

> Is that not mythical metaphysics? The assertion that one must follow the interests of the object is a deception. Hegel had absolute reason, fulfillment, as his guide *[Leitfaden]*. What do we have as a guide? (12, p. 604).

When Adorno suggested that the "illness" of reason itself might play such a role for them, Horkheimer responded that to follow this guide would be to repeat the argument that had already been offered in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, not to provide a sequel (12, p. 604). For Horkheimer, at least, work on the proposed sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* seemed to be leading into a dead end.

An alternative way of grounding the critique of instrumental reason had been briefly considered, but never developed, shortly before Horkheimer and Adorno began work in earnest on the

Dialectic of Enlightenment. In a letter to Adorno dated September 14, 1941, Horkheimer reflected on what was now, for him, a familiar theme: the relationship between reason and language. He drew out some rather surprising implications:

> Language intends, completely independent of the psychological intentions of the speaker, that universality which has been ascribed to reason alone. The interpretation of this universality leads necessarily to the idea of the just society. In the service of the status quo, language must therefore find that it constantly contradicts itself, and this is evident from individual linguistic structures themselves. . . . There would always be a contradiction between serving the dominant practice and necessarily intending the correct generality. . . . "Critique of language" would thus be a *Genitivus subjectivus* (17, p. 171).[11]

For a brief moment, Horkheimer entertained the possibility that the grounds for critique might be found within the very structure of language itself.

Horkheimer's sketch of the implications of this critique bears, of course, a striking resemblance to the position that Jürgen Habermas would subsequently elaborate, not fully realizing that he was resuming a project Horkheimer had briefly considered several decades before. The reduction of language to the role of an instrument in the process of economic planning betrays a telos that Horkheimer saw as inherent in speech itself.

> To speak to someone is, basically, to recognize them as a possible member of the future association of free human beings. Speech establishes a shared relation to truth, and is therefore the innermost affirmation of another existence, indeed of all that exists, according to its capacities. Insofar as speech denies the capacities, it finds itself in a necessary contradiction with itself. The speech of the concentration

> camp guard is actually a terrible illogicality, no matter what its content is; unless, of course, it condemns the speaker's own duties (17, p. 172).

The last line of resistance to the instrumentalization of reason thus lies in language itself. The very attempt to speak to another holds out the image of a society in which individuals are something more than means.

Magic and Myth

As we know, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* did not develop this theme, and Horkheimer's reflections on the relationship between speech and recognition remained a path not taken. Instead of elaborating the contradiction between the imperatives of instrumental manipulation and communicative interaction, Horkheimer and Adorno grounded their argument on the thesis that "myth is already enlightenment and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (5, p. 21 [xvi]). This intertwining of myth and enlightenment constitutes the central problem of the remarkably dense first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment.*

The successive names given to the first chapter provide a hint as to how Horkheimer and Adorno's conception of it seems to have evolved. In the earliest typescripts it is called simply "Myth and Enlightenment." In the mimeographed version of 1944 it is entitled "Dialectic of Enlightenment." Finally, in the 1947 publication, it becomes "The Concept of Enlightenment." Thus, what was initially conceived as a juxtaposition of myth and enlightenment became a dialectic in which myth and enlightenment interpenetrated each other to such an extent that, in the final version, the discussion could rightly claim the status of a Hegelian "concept": a contradictory figure "in which everything is always that which it is only because it becomes that which it is not" (5, p. 37 [15]).

In constructing this argument, they had at least one model on which they could draw: Hegel's account of the dialectic of faith and enlightenment in the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* Hegel had argued that the battle between enlightenment and religious belief was in truth a struggle between two parties who share a common disgust for the world of the "self-alienated spirit" but were ultimately equally incapable of finding a way beyond it. This, for Hegel, explained both the ease with which enlightenment could rout faith and the utter emptiness of the enlightenment's achievement. Quoting a passage from *Rameau's Nephew,* Hegel likens the spread of enlightenment to "the diffusion of a perfume in an unresisting atmosphere." Recognition of the extent of its penetration comes too late, and every struggle against it "only aggravates the disease, for it has laid hold of the marrow of spiritual life" (Hegel, 1977, p. 331). This passage from the *Phenomenology* seems to have had a peculiar hold on Horkheimer. Not only is it cited in the first chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* but—perhaps more significantly—Horkheimer also quoted it in a letter to his friend Friedrich Pollock, explaining that he and Adorno were attempting to provide nothing less than an understanding of "the process of enlightenment as it was marked out in the first thought a human being conceived, that same process of which Hegel says that if started it is irresistible" (17, p. 446).

While Horkheimer and Adorno were concerned with the struggle between enlightenment and mythology rather than between enlightenment and faith, their argument mirrors Hegel's. The goal of the enlightenment, as they understood it, was "to dissolve myths and to depose imagination through knowledge" (5, p. 25 [3]). Yet, "the myths which fell victim *[zum Opfer fallen]* to Enlightenment were its own product" (5, p. 30 [8]). In both the *Phenomenology* and the *Dialectic of Enlightenment,* enlightenment battles itself and wins; but Horkheimer and Adorno placed a greater stress on the bitterness of the victory than their predecessor. They argued that the enlightenment's attack on mythology presses forward until the fundamental normative commitments of enlight-

enment itself have themselves been denounced as mythical. By the time the enlightenment has run its course, there is no longer a distinction to be made

> between the totemic animal, the dreams of a ghost seer, and the absolute Idea. On the path to modern science men renounce any claim to meaning. They substitute formula for concept, rule and probability for cause (5, p. 27 [5]).

The figures of myth give way to philosophical concepts that are finally abandoned in favor of the formulae of science, which seeks to dispense with traditional philosophical categories altogether (5, pp. 27–28 [5–6]). Enlightened thought is left with a world in which any illusions regarding ruling or inherent powers have been banished.

The enlightenment's victory thus comes at a considerable cost. The enlightenment must denounce as "myth" the very values that once animated it. As Horkheimer subsequently argued in *Eclipse of Reason*,

> The more ideas have become automatic, instrumentalized, the less does anybody see in them thoughts with a meaning of their own. They are considered things, machines. Language has been reduced to just another tool in the gigantic apparatus of production in modern society. . . . [J]ustice, equality, happiness, tolerance, all the concepts that . . . were in preceding centuries supposed to be inherent in or sanctioned by reason, have lost their intellectual roots (Horkheimer, 1947, pp. 27–28).

Indeed, even the term *reason* itself has come to be viewed as "a ghost that has emerged from linguistic usage," a name used to designate a "meaningless symbol, an allegorical figure without a function." It survives only in the guise of "a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency" (Horkheimer, 1978a, pp. 27–28). Reason

has been reduced to a strategy of self-preservation that, in the end, "boils down to an obstinate compliance as such" that is "indifferent to any political or religious content" (Horkheimer, 1978a, p. 34).[12] All thought that does anything other than make its peace with existing powers stands condemned as "poetry" or empty "metaphysics."

Had the argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* stopped here (and summaries of the book sometime do stop here), the book would have long ago found a comfortable resting place among the many critics of the enlightenment who have argued that the grand project of freeing mankind from illusion ultimately culminates in nihilism. Thinkers from Edmund Burke to Hans-Georg Gadamer have argued that the enlightenment's attack on prejudices was itself a prejudice, and have called for a greater deference toward tradition. Thinkers from Nietzsche to postmodernists have basically agreed with their conservative brethren that reason has undermined its own foundations—though, less concerned about the results, they have been inclined to endorse Nietzsche's dictum: "That which is falling. . . Push!" What prevents the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* from fitting in easily with other critiques of the enlightenment lies in the first part of the chiasmus: "mythology is already enlightenment." Where other critics of the enlightenment respond to its alleged failings by seeking to reactivate modes of thinking that had not been corrupted by enlightenment rationality, this path is not available to Horkheimer and Adorno. Since, in their view, the concept of enlightenment "stretches back to the beginning of recorded history," they can find no form of thinking that is not already inclined toward enlightenment.

The notion that myth is already enlightenment originates as early as January 1939 when Adorno, in discussions with Horkheimer, "improvised" an "historico-philosophical theory of the individual" in which the figure of Oedipus is seen as marking the threshold of mankind's progress toward "maturity" *(Mündigkeitswerden).*

> Oedipus' answer to the question of the mythical Sphinx, which causes its demise, constitutes the identity of man against the diversity of the ages of his life. In the same moment in which the Sphinx is driven into the abyss by the word "man," the vagrant gains possession of wife and property. In the moment in which he banishes mythical multiplicity, it falls to him as what he possesses (12, p. 453).

With a single word, then, Oedipus reduces a multiplicity to a unity (whether it crawls on four legs, walks on two, or hobbles on three, it remains "a man") and establishes his sovereignty: Jocasta and Thebes are now his. His solution to the Sphinx's riddle—"It is man!"—provides the enlightenment with a paradigm for bringing a diversity of mythical figures under a common denominator and thus depriving them of their power: everything turns out to be an alienated projection of human powers (5, p. 29 [6–7]). The enlightenment's disenchantment of the world follows Oedipus's lead and reaps the rewards: men need no longer fear nature (the spirits and demons are only the projections of weak and frightened men), and, no longer fearing nature, they may now learn how to command it. Only two minor adjustments needed to be made in Adorno's "improvisation" to produce the final argument of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment.* First, the distinction between myth and enlightenment was clarified by adding at third term to the discussion: *magic.* Second, Oepidus was moved to the sidelines and another mythological figure given pride of place: Odysseus.

In a letter written to Herbert Marcuse in the fall of 1941, Horkheimer commented that Marx and Engels ("our intellectual ancestors") were "not so foolish with their lasting interest in prehistory." Noting that in California all he had to work from were the works of "Bachofen, Reinach and Frazer, as well as Rohde and Levy-Bruhl; Malinowski and Lowie's *Cultural Anthropology,*" he advised Marcuse to be on the lookout for "useful books on ethnology and mythology" (Wiggershaus, 1994, p. 321). Add the essay by Durkheim and Mauss on primitive classification to the list, along with Mauss' *General Theory of Magic,* Mauss and Hubert's

study of sacrifice, and the essays on imitation and festivals by the surrealist anthropologist Roger Caillois, and one begins to have a sense of the literature on which Horkheimer and Adorno drew in constructing their argument. That writings from the French anthropological tradition loom large on this list is not surprising. From Horkheimer's correspondence we know that Adorno's friend Walter Benjamin had attended sessions of the famous "College of Sociology" organized by the surrealists Bataille, Caillois, and Klossowski and that Horkheimer, prior to the collapse of France, had frequent contact with the group (16, pp. 34, 39, 99, 111, 127, 144). While Horkheimer appeared to have been frustrated in his efforts to integrate work from the Institute's economists and historians into the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, here—in what strikes many readers as the most abstract and speculative part of the work—he was concerned to maintain at least some ties between his own philosophical speculations and the work of social scientists.

While Adorno's initial discussion of Oedipus had opposed mythology and enlightenment, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* suggests that, when contrasted with magical/mimetic relationships to nature, mythology is as already on the path toward enlightenment. Drawing on the work of Marcel Mauss, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that magic presupposed neither a unity of nature nor a unity of the subject: deities are local and specific and the shaman must take up various cultic masks in order to imitate the objects over which mastery is to be gained (5, pp. 31–34 [9–11]). Mythology, in contrast, represents an attempt both "to report, to name, to say the origin" and to "present, preserve, and explain" (5, p. 31 [8]). In place of the milieu-bound practices of magic, mythology requires a separation of ideas from reality that was first achieved by the reality adjusted ego (5, p. 33 [11]). In a note from the early 1950s, Horkheimer offered a pithy summary of the thrust of his earlier argument:

> We are always mindful of the fact that as contrasted with the spiritual God, mythology is a false religion. But as we face

> the totally dark world, the threatening and the insipid one of the primitive, it yet contains something positive, something that confers meaning, the beginning of relativization, negation (Horkheimer, 1978b, p. 124).

The origins of individuality, in short, lie on this side of the line between magic and mythology.

The transition from magic to myth was accompanied by a centralization of power and the development of a division between mental and manual labor. "The lyrics of Homer and hymns of the Rig-Veda," Horkheimer and Adorno noted, "date from the time of territorial domination and the secure locations in which a dominant warlike race established themselves over the mass of vanquished natives" (5, p. 36 [13]). Following Durkheim, they argued that even the categories of subordination and superordination in logic had their basis in new forms of social domination (5, p. 44 [21]). Likewise, with a nod to Hegel's account of the dialectic of master and slave, they argued that the separation between subject and object is grounded on the distance of the thing that the master achieves through the mastered (5, p. 36 [14]). With the move beyond magical/mimetic relations to the world, language renounces the claim to be like nature and instead limits itself to the task of calculation and control (5, p. 40 [18]).

The "irresistibility of enlightenment" that Hegel had proclaimed is now linked to the most fundamental of impulses: fear. In Vico's account of the origin of language, the gasp of surprise at the unusual becomes its name (5, p. 38 [15]). Hence the inability of mythology to provide any comfort for man: the names of the gods are the petrified sound of human fear (5, p. 40 [15–16]). Enlightenment is this mythic fear turned radical, pressing onward, distinguishing appearance and essence, activity and force, seeking to produce a world in which everything is repeatable and calculable. In its drive to create a world in which there is nothing to be feared, it spares no remnant of mythological thinking except for the very foundation of mythological thinking itself:

the abstract fear of the collectivity (5, p. 45 [23]). The "noontime panic" in the face of nature is replaced with a fear of social forces that can only be assuaged by that relentless effort at self-preservation that ultimately discards the ideals of enlightenment itself as just another bit of mythology (5, p. 51 [29]).

From Oedipus to Odysseus

Writing to Ruth Nanda Anshen in March 1943, Horkheimer summarized the progress he and Adorno had made on their manuscript as follows:

> Three chapters are now completed, one on MYTHOLOGY AND ENLIGHTENMENT, the other on ENLIGHTENMENT AND MORALS, and a third on MASS CULTURE. An interlude on the adventures of Odysseus as the great incarnation of Enlightenment is in the making (17, p. 435).

Horkheimer and Adorno thus settled on the idea of devoting an excursus to the Odyssey only after a good deal of what would become the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* had already been drafted. With the entry of Odysseus, the character of the book changed in a number of ways. Most obviously, the chapter on "Enlightenment and Morals" now became—like the discussion of Odysseus—an "excursus" on the opening chapter. Further, the increased attention given to Odysseus spared Horkheimer and Adorno the burden of attempting, in the shadow of Freud, to rest their account of the relationship between mythology and enlightenment on the first chapter's discussion of the Oedipus myth (Rabinbach, 1997). While Adorno's earlier account of Oedipus and the Sphinx still had a role to play in the opening discussion of the disenchantment of the world, treating Odysseus as "the great incarnation of Enlightenment" allowed Adorno—who appears to have been chiefly responsible for the excursus—to revisit the entire argument of the opening chapter, with attention now devoted to the

subject that emerges from the process.[13] By taking up and "organizing" myth, the Homeric epic reveals the world "to be the work of ordering reason, which destroys myth precisely by means of the rational order in which it reflects myth." Its song of the deeds of Odysseus is a "nostalgic stylization of what may no longer be sung": the hero of the *Odyssey* is "the prototype of the bourgeois individual" and, hence, Homer's epic is already well on the way to becoming a novel (5, p. 67 [43]). But if Odysseus already prefigures the bourgeoisie—and thus supports the argument that mythology is already enlightenment—the excursus does not neglect the other side of the chiasmus around which the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is constructed. Enlightenment falls back into mythology and a "bourgeois enlightenment" built on "sobriety, common sense, and the accurate estimation of relations of force" turns out to be nothing more than another form of mythical sacrifice (5, pp. 80–81 [57]).

Adorno reads Odysseus' adventures as an account of the flight of the individual from the mythical powers that it had only recently escaped. In the Homeric epic, "the identity of the self is so much a function of the nonidentical, of the dissociated, unarticulated myths, that self-identity must be derived from them." As in Hegel's *Phenomenology*, subjectivity is formed and educated through a confrontation with the world: "In the image of voyaging, historical time laboriously, revocably, detaches itself from space, the irrevocable schema of all mythic time" (5, pp. 72 [48]). At each stage in the journey, Odysseus must hold out against powers that threaten to dissolve the still-fragile individuality that he has wrested away from nature. The path homeward is strewn with temptations. The Lotus-eaters hold out the temptation of a life without labor (5, pp. 86–7 [62–3]). Circe reduces Odysseus's men to a state of animality (5, pp. 93–5 [69–71]). The Sirens promise a suspension of time itself (5, pp. 55–56 [32–33]. Calculating and plotting, deceiving the powers that threaten to overwhelm him, Odysseus barely scrapes through. He masters natural forces by learning how to give in to them—but only up to a point: he manages to find loopholes that allow him to "escape the law while ful-

filling it" (5, p. 82 [59]). Realizing that nothing requires his men to be able to hear the Sirens and that nothing forbids him from being immobilized, he is able to outwit them. Thus, he renders unto nature what nature claims, but in the process manages to escape it—but, once again, only up to a point: "The self wrests itself free from dissolution in blind nature, whose claim is always reasserted by sacrifice" (5, p. 77 [54]). Odysseus frees himself from the control over nature only because he practices a self-renunciation that amounts to a sacrifice of the self (5, p. 79 [55]).

With the introduction of the excursus on the *Odyssey,* the argument of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* moved toward a closure of sorts. The intertwining of myth and enlightenment could now be seen both on the level of the culture at large and on the level of the formation of the bourgeois subject itself. The story of Odysseus traces, on the level of the individual, the same trajectory that Horkheimer and Adorno found in Western civilization itself: the attempt to break free from mythology falls back into mythology. As they began to bring the work to a conclusion with the chapter on anti-Semitism, they might have had reason to think that manuscript that they were producing had a greater coherence than its modest title—*Philosophische Fragmente*—suggested.

Awakening and Enlightening

It is worth asking whether the closure that Horkheimer and Adorno achieved with the further elaboration of the intertwining of myth and enlightenment on the level of the development of individual subjectivity came at too high a cost. What eventually became the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* now had a systematicity that was almost as relentless as the *Phenomenology of Spirit.* But while Hegel's "path of despair" wound up at Golgotha, it at least held out the promise of a bacchanalia of spirits as its sequel. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ends at Auschwitz, with its sequel unwritten.

Yet, for all of its pessimism, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is not without moments of hope. The opening chapter closed by sug-

gesting that, by bringing about a massive extension of human powers over nature, enlightenment had created the preconditions for a situation in which the subject that exercised this rule would no longer be a single class, but instead "everyone." And it held out the hope that this collective subject would learn "from the power of things" how "finally to dispense with power" (5, p. 66 [42]). The concluding thesis on anti-Semitism—which appeared for the first time in the 1947 edition of the book—was even more emphatic. Arguing that anti-Semitism had become a dispensable part of the fascist "ticket" that was "so meaningless that, as a substitute for something better, it can only be upheld by the desperate efforts of the deluded," they concluded:

> Its horror lies in the fact that the lie is obvious but persists. Though it permits no truth against which it could be measured, truth appears negatively in the very boundlessness of the absurdity; and the undiscerning can be permanently kept from that truth only if they are wholly deprived of the faculty of thought. Enlightenment which is in possession of itself and coming to power can break the bounds of enlightenment (5, p. 208 [238]).

While the chapter "The Culture Industry" ends without a similar hint of a possible release from its "mass deception," the unpublished conclusion to the chapter was more in keeping with the last thesis on anti-Semitism:

> The neon signs which hang over our cities and outshine the natural light of the night with their own are comets presaging the natural disaster of society, its frozen death. Yet they do not come from the sky. They are controlled from the earth. It depends upon human beings themselves whether they will extinguish these lights and awake from a nightmare which only threatens to become actual as long as men believe in it (Adorno, 1991, p. 83).

Thus, each of the three chapters of what was to form the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* ends with an image of awakening from a dream, of returning to consciousness, of a coming to possession of one's powers. Though Horkheimer and Adorno were probably not aware of it, a return to consciousness after a period of illness or sleep was one of the eighteenth-century meanings of the word *"Aufklären"* (Schmidt, 1992, pp. 79–80).

The intent of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was to offer a critique of enlightenment as relentless and unforgiving as that mounted by the enlightenment's fiercest critics and yet, somehow, remain loyal to the enlightenment's hopes. Hence the importance of the book's unwritten sequel. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* traced the process by which the dreams of the enlightenment had turned into a nightmare. The unwritten *Rettung der Aufklärung* would awaken the enlightenment from its nightmare, restore it to consciousness, and set it back on its path. Any reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that is unaware of the incompleteness of its argument runs the risk of misunderstanding the intentions of its authors. And any attempt to remain faithful to the project begun by Horkheimer and Adorno can find no better starting point than the question that stymied them half a century ago: How can the enlightenment be rescued?

Notes

[1] References to Horkheimer's *Gesammelte Schriften* will be to the volume and page number. In the case of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, reference will be made first to Volume 5 of the *Gesammelte Schriften* and then to the English translation (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972).

[2] The legal theorist Siegfried Marck, thanking Horkheimer for his copy, confessed that he found it difficult to enter into a "world of thought" that moved from Odysseus to the eighteenth century and from Kant to the Marquis de Sade (17, p. 686).

[3] See Horkheimer's August 1947 letters to Adolphe Lowe and Paul Tillich (17, pp. 873, 884).

[4] In a letter written to Friedrich Pollock as he began work on the lectures, he questioned whether they were worth the effort, explaining that ". . . reading a page of these lectures as I now start to dictate them, and comparing it with a page of my own texts, I must say it is almost a crime" (17, p. 539). Nearly two years later, as he worked to turn the lectures into a finished manuscript, he told Pollock, "It is not the English exoteric version of thoughts already formulated which matters, but the development of a positive dialectical doctrine which has not yet been written" (17, pp. 687–88). Paul Lazarsfeld, who had long urged Horkheimer to disseminate his work in a more accessible fashion, was considerably more enthusiastic, calling the book, "a real step forward toward the kind of institute's [sic] policy I have always hoped you would follow. The book is written in such a way as to make it understandable to many people and will undoubtedly also influence many readers. As a matter of fact, I, myself, have never so clearly understood before some of your basic ideas" (17, p. 846).

[5] For a discussion of Adorno's revisions, see Reijen and Bransen, 1987, pp. 453–57.

[6] As late as December 1946, Horkheimer still referred to the forthcoming book as *Philosophische Fragmente* (Horkheimer, 1996, p. 359). The earliest use of the new title in Horkheimer's published letters occurs in an August 29, 1947 letter to Paul Tillich, which states that the book will appear "before Christmas" (17, p. 884).

[7] See Franz Neumann's discussion of his response to Carl Friedrich's characterization of the Institute as "Marxist" in his letter to Horkheimer of August, 13, 1941 (17, pp. 130–31).

[8] Horkheimer first learned of the existence of the document, which was brought by Hannah Arendt to New York in the summer of 1941, in a letter from Adorno of June 12, 1941 (17, p. 59). It bears mentioning that not all of Horkheimer's correspondence with Benjamin has been published. Additional letters are in the possession of the Adorno Archive will eventually appear as part of Benjamin's collected correspondence.

[9] See Horkheimer, 1972, pp. 132–87. In an attempt to clarify the differences between the theorists of the Vienna Circle and the Frankfurt School, a meeting was arranged in Paris in the summer of 1937, with Adorno, Benjamin, and Paul Lazarsfeld representing the Frankfurt School and Otto Neurath, Rudolf Carnap, Philipp Frank, and Carl Hempel representing the Vienna Circle. A passing mention is made of this curious meeting in Adorno's letter to Horkheimer of August 7, 1937 (16, p. 210).

[10] See the discussion transcripts from October 1946 (12, pp. 594–605). For discussions of the projected contents of the sequel to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, see Horkheimer's correspondence with Paul Tillich from 1947 (17, pp. 884, 892–93).

[11] For a discussion of this letter, see Wiggershaus, 1994, pp. 504–5.

[12] Similar accounts of the reduction of reason to a conformist self-preservation can be found in his writings from the late 1930s. See Horkheimer, 1972, pp. 142–43 and Horkheimer, 1993, pp. 271, 292, 294.

[13] In the third chapter of *Eclipse of Reason*, "The Rise and Decline of the Individual," Horkheimer offered a more straightforward account of some of the themes broached in the excursus on Odysseus.

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